TELLS THE FACTS AND NAMES THE NAMES

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Seymour Melman and the FBI's Monitoring of the Demilitarization Movement

By David Price

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Seymour Melman was a well-known critic of the arms industry's takeover of the American economy. Studying industrial engineering and economics, in the post-war years he picked up on Eisenhower's famous farewell warning of dangers the world faced by the unbridled growth of the American Military Industrial Complex.

With books like *Inspection for Disarmament* (1958), *Our Depleted Society* (1965) and *The Permanent War Economy* (1974), Melman presented accessible critiques during the 1950s, '60s and '70s of how Pentagon capitalism was robbing America of opportunities to confront basic issues such as poverty, lack of universal health care, and comprehensive mass transit. Melman had a command of financial data and a mind that made sense of complex systems. He was fond of pointing out not only the sheer waste but the illogic of a military economic system, devoted to producing so many nuclear weapons when "not even the largest military budget allows you to kill a person more than once."

Melman was a professor of Industrial Engineering and Operations Research at Columbia University from 1949-2003; he died in 2004 at the age of 87. His lifelong critical political engagements broke the mold of his training as an engineer, and his life as a public intellectual showed the promise of the roles to be played by thinkers in a free society. Similarly, the FBI's monitoring of him, his private life

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U.S. Popularity Plummets

Report from the Afghan Front

By Patrick Cockburn

Embedded reporters in Afghanistan specialize in battlefront descriptions of skirmishes with the Taliban in the mud-brick villages of Helmand Province or assaults on insurgent strongholds in the mountains along the Afghan-Pakistani border. It's very much like pictures of intrepid British red coats storming the heights along the Khyber Pass and the Kabul Gorge during Britain's disastrous efforts to invade the country in the 19th century.

It is also very misleading. Television reports and newspaper articles give the impression that the Taliban lurk in their rural hideouts, while the most important development in the last three years is that they have cut the main highways linking Afghanistan's largest cities. Their control begins a few miles south of Kabul. Roving squads of Taliban fighters, usually six to eight men, move swiftly across country on motorcycles and set up mobile checkpoints. Sometimes, in addition to examining documents, they take mobile phones from travelers and redial recent calls. If the call is answered by a government office, then the owner may be killed on the spot.

"I used to go every weekend to my house in a village in Logar Province," says Ali, a businessman in the capital, "but I have not dared do that for over a year because I am frightened I will run into Taliban." One of the reasons house prices are going up in Kabul and Jalalabad is that people no longer think it safe to live in the country and travel to work in the city.

Taliban rule is not total across southern Afghanistan, but much of the area has been a no man's land since 2006. Afghan truckers carrying supplies for U.S.A. or NATO forces have to pay local security companies for protection or bribe their way through. Not all the gunmen on the roads are Taliban: some local commanders and bandits act independently, though probably under license from the Taliban. One Western aid official in Kabul told me that a "100-truck convoy traveling from Pakistan to the Dutch base in Oruzgan Province paid $750,000 for safe passage." The figure sounds too high, but similar stories are told by the owners of local Afghan trucking companies, always a more accurate source of information on the extent of the Taliban's reach than Western diplomats or military officers.

"It got really bad 18 months ago," says Abdul Bayan of the Nawe Aryana transport company. "Now, if I am carrying goods to a NATO base and we are going to Kandahar or any of the towns on the way, we travel in a convoy of 15-20 trucks protected by five SUVs, each with four armed guards. If we are going to Kandahar, it costs me $1,000 for each truck." If the Taliban capture a truck, they either burn it or ask for $10,000 to $12,000 to release it unharmed. Since each truck is worth $70,000, Bayan always pays up. NATO and U.S. officials, so keen to stress that the Taliban is partly financed by the profits of the opium and heroin trade, never mention that it also draws a healthy income from its stranglehold on the supply lines of Western forces. I asked Bayam, if he had ever asked the Afghan army or police to protect his convoys. He looked bewildered and said, "Get protection from the soldiers and policemen? They can't even protect themselves: what can they do for me?"

Over the last few years the Afghan government, despite being supported by

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and public advocacy shows the role the FBI has long fulfilled as enforcer of the American corporate status quo.

In response to my Freedom of Information Act request, the FBI recently released 219 pages of Melman's FBI file, which records how the mid-20th century FBI conceived of those challenging the economic sustainability of military-industrial capitalism as likely enemies of state.

The FBI first investigated Melman in 1955-56 as part of a standard background check for his work as a consultant for Senator Harley Kilgore's Senate Subcommittee on Copyrights, Patents and Trademarks. The Bureau learned that during 1939-40 Melman traveled in Europe and Palestine. The FBI showed concerns over his past membership in the American Student Zionist Federation but did not discover that Melman had been involved in Avukah, a socialist Zionist student movement that put him in contact with linguist Zellig Harris, who later supervised his World War II work for an Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) language project. When the FBI interviewed Zellig Harris in January 1956, as part of this employee background check, he did not mention any political connections with Melman, instead only reporting that "Melman was introduced to him by an undergraduate student at [University of Pennsylvania] in 1941. Melman later wrote [Harris] asking if he had some work he could do. Melman knew the Arabic language and in that the university was handling ASTP, he hired Melman to give lectures ... and he considered him to be of good character, a loyal American and would recommend him for a position of trust."

The FBI worried that Melman had been hired by Columbia University "at the request of professor Walter Rautenstrauch, who was described as having been in several Communist Party front groups and who was one of the principals involved in the Communist conspiracy to subvert the Methodist Church for Communist purposes." Melman was finally cleared to work for Senator Kilgore's committee, but concerns raised in this investigation were added to his file where they echoed for decades.

The FBI's monitoring of Melman, his private life and public advocacy shows the role the Bureau has long fulfilled as enforcer of the American corporate status quo.

In 1959, the FBI learned that Melman conferred with Nikolai Smelyakov, Soviet president of the Amtorg Trading Company, during the latter's U.S. visit. In this 1959 investigation of Melman, the FBI's suspicions multiplied after they learned that the previous year he had published a book entitled *Inspection For Disarmament*, advocating nuclear disarmament. Melman's work on nuclear disarmament kept the FBI's attention for decades.

Already, a year earlier, in 1958, one FBI informer (a former Communist Party member) reported that an unidentified Columbia professor had said that the Committee for the Study of Peace and War, a committee led by Melman at Columbia, "had discussed a plan to smuggle 'fake hydrogen bombs' into the U.S. and Russia in order to demonstrate how insecure the world is today." When the FBI then learned that Melman had been scouting industrial machine shops, they seemed to think this activity might be related to these reports of efforts to build a fake hydrogen bomb – as if this might be the only reason that an industrial engineer might seek out an industrial machine shop.

In 1960, an employee of the Library of Congress wrote to FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover, to report some private correspondence he'd had with Melman regarding a manuscript on automation in the USSR. This library employee told Hoover that in a recent article Melman advocated what he considered to be pro-Soviet views on industrialization. This informer added that an unnamed colonel, working at the Pentagon, was so angered by Melman's article that he considered placing a rebuttal in the *New York Times*. But with the able assistance of this librarian-informer, the colonel found a far more satisfying means of attacking Melman: by raising the issue of Melman's loyalties with the FBI. This colonel worried that "in view of Melman's position as a professor at Columbia University ... [Melman's] views might have a dangerous influence on the students there." In later years, the FBI would recycle this disgruntled colonel's complaint that Melman's article was "an espousal of the Communist Party line." This recycling of an attack by a critic shows a fundamental danger of these FBI files, where a single biting comment, or a baseless speculation, takes on an eternal life of its own, often re-spun in files until speculations become presented as facts.

As Melman began publishing books written for the American public on the negative effects of the Cold War military spending, the FBI assigned employees in its Central Research Section to read and analyze his work. In reviewing his 1962 book, *The Peace Race*, they found: "Melman believes that underdeveloped nations consider the Soviet economy to be more realistic although they desire freedom. He asks the question 'can we offer to underdeveloped nations a plan which combines (Soviet) economic planning with Western personal freedom?' His answer is: Yes, by industrializing these countries and encouraging the workers to form autonomous, independent organizations which will have a voice in economic decisions." The FBI summarized Melman's argument that the

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SPECIAL LEGAL APPEAL

A Message to CounterPunch readers from Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair

Last year *CounterPunch* was sued for a report on our website about a defense contractor in Virginia. He sought damages that would have put us out of business.

We stood by our story, and our legal team, headed by our lawyer Jonathan Lubell, mounted an energetic defense.

Earlier this year, minutes before the first full hearing in Superior Court in Washington, D.C., the plaintiff's lawyers announced that their client was dropping his suit.

CounterPunch fought back against a powerful opponent and prevailed, but the legal costs have been high: $34,603.

Our annual budget is always tight, and with this extra expense, the fund drive is a matter of urgency to help cover these legal expenditures.

Please contribute what you can for this Special Legal Appeal.

Send a check or money order payable to: CounterPunch, P.O. Box 228, Petrolia, CA 95558, or contribute over the phone with a credit card (visa, mc, amex or discover) by calling us toll-free at 1(800) 840-3683 or 1(707) 629-3683 (from outside the U.S.) To contribute online, on our home page, www.counterpunch.org, click the link that says "donations" on the top menu bar. All donations are tax-deductible. Please call if you have any questions.

U.S.A. could win the international battle for hearts and minds, if it would engage in unilateral nuclear disarmament. The FBI wrote, "Realizing that the U.S. must have a plan to take care of its industrial capacity after disarmament, professor Melman suggests that the capacity can be used to raise living standards in underdeveloped areas of the U.S., for production for 'public sectors' of the economy, and to industrialize the 'rest of the earth.' The areas of the economy which would be expanded through central government planning would include health functions, transportation, water supply, electricity and natural resources, scientific research and housing." This FBI book critic concluded, "It is quite evident that professor Melman would side-step Patrick Henry's cry 'Give me liberty, or give me death' with the statement: In order to have liberty, there must first be life."

The FBI monitored Melman's interactions with Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Committee for the Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), Columbia University teach-ins, and his work with Noam Chomsky and Benjamin Spock in opposing the draft for the Vietnam War and other groups during the 1960s. As the FBI increasingly monitored Melman's public criticism of the Pentagon, one 1964 near-Dadaist file entry simply reads: "The Defense Department recently denied Melman's charges that the United States had stockpiled more than enough nuclear weapons needed for a full scale war." The absurdity of this statement can be seen by considering that the National Resources Defense Council's Archive of Nuclear Data now estimates that 1964 was one of four record high-water-mark years with an estimated record [of?] 30,751 stockpiled U.S. warheads.

A 1967 FBI "Russian Espionage" report claimed that a "KGB officer had regular contact with a very well-known professor in the United States. This professor wrote a book about the economic consequences of disarmament. Source believes his name begins with 'S'; however, the source cannot recall the complete name. This professor's KGB code name is [Mansha]. Source stated that he is not an agent of the KGB, but an individual with whom the KGB has established a trusted relationship." The next month, an FBI informer claimed that "Melman is one

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of the most dangerous Communists in the U.S. She felt that Melman was an extremely important key in the Communist conspiracy to weaken the U.S. government by fostering unilateral disarmament. According to [this FBI informer] Melman heads a conspiracy to weaken the industrial might of the U.S."

After the FBI collected the sniping comments of FBI informers and disgruntled colleagues, these reports were rehashed within the FBI over the decades until what appeared as speculations in initial reports were reified as facts. Case in point: by 1972, initial 1958 reports that Melman was part of an activist group considering smuggling *fake* hydrogen bombs into the U.S.A. and USSR to demonstrate the insecurity of nuclear states had been transformed into a plot to smuggle *real* hydrogen bombs. As the FBI reported in 1972, "A group at Columbia University discussed plans to smuggle a few hydrogen bombs into the United States and Russia in order to show the potential insecurity of the world. The group was believed to be called the 'Group for the Study of Peace and War' and to be headed by [Melman]."

In early 1968, the FBI interviewed Melman in his university office as part of Attorney General Ramsey Clark's case against Benjamin Spock and the Rev. William Sloan Coffin for conspiring to destroy selective service documents. The FBI told Melman that they were investigating whether he had violated Section 462 or Title 50 of the U.S. Code, outlawing giving aid or abetting others evading draft registration. Melman denied ever directing counseling individuals to resist the draft. The FBI reported Melman "claimed that the constitutionality of Selective Service itself has never been tested in court. It was his opinion that because of the illegality of the Vietnam War certain actions taken by Selective Service could be considered violations of the laws of war. Professor Melman stated that he did not 'approve or condemn' the act of destroying or handing in draft cards to the Department of Justice … He declined to discuss participants in this act."

In 1971, the FBI intercepted, copied and analyzed Melman's correspondence relating to the Pugwash Symposium held in Leipzig – including his visa application and personal correspondence to his wife, Ruth Sager, mailed from Berlin – filing these intercepts under "International Security." The FBI's last entries in Melman's file discuss information on a Russian exchange student who had Melman as an adviser at Columbia. The FBI planned to interview Russian-American contacts in the student's residence and, upon learning of Melman's contacts with the Soviet student, the FBI fantasized about ways to limit the academic freedom of Melman and others, writing that "the Bureau may wish to discuss with State Department officials at the appropriate time and place the folly of having academic advisors with the reputation of Melman participating in an official East-West Exchange program." The record of the FBI's monitoring of Melman suddenly ends in November 1974, a cutoff consistent with the sudden drop in FBI records of other American dissidents during this period. The paper trail's sudden end is likely related to investigation limits enacted during the post-Watergate moment, when the Church Committee and other Congressional actions installed safeguards limiting the FBI's monitoring of Americans' political activities. While it is unknown what sort of off-the-books domestic FBI investigations continued after the establishment of these mid-'70s safeguards, we do know these safeguards were swiftly obliterated with bipartisan adaption of the Patriot Act in October 2001.

FBI files generate and sustain an internal logic that amplifies suspicion into substance by fetishizing the fragmentary information in the files; creating false gestalts of guilt wherein the repeated shards of rumors are reconstituted in ways that cast shadows of guilt greater than the facts sustain. FBI files from this period frequently manufactured a logic justifying the surveillance of progressives working on issues such as racial equality, disarmament, economic justice as having (as it appears in Melman's file) "espoused some views which have long been popular with the Communist Party and related groups." The FBI simultaneously and repeatedly acknowledged that these individuals have not violated any laws, or, in Melman's case, had "never been identified as a CP member or actively associated with any front groups." But these free ranging FBI investigations were not about investigations of law breaking, they were about monitoring dissent; as such, they mark not only the borders of orthodoxy, they mark effectiveness or the perceived threat of a critique. By this measure, Melman's critique of the economic damage of the American military economy was fairly effective.

Decades ago, sociologist Steven Spitzer argued that the determinant of what would be considered deviant in a given society would be that which threatens the society's dominant economic forces; and Melman's critiques of the damage wrought by the excesses of military spending and his opposition to the nuclear arms race cut to the core of the military industrial complex's interests that the FBI so loyally protected. Melman's file demonstrates the FBI's functional role as an arm of a state secret police apparatus, designed to sniff out and mark deviants threatening to undermine the political and economic interests of what used to be called the Power Elite. That such a critic of the American nuclear state would be tainted with baseless accusations of being a spy should be expected in such contexts. **CP**

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The Digital Con

The long-awaited mandatory conversion from analog to digital TV reception on June 13 was mostly treated in the press as an exciting day of adventure, of American-can-do-it, marred only by a few gloomsters lamenting the fact that they can no long get the show they want unless they started renting cable service, at which point it turns out the shows they like aren't available.

Hey! This is capitalism. Love it or leave it. Back in 1932, the TV companies stole the public airwaves with government connivance and used it to beam commercial propaganda, in the form of advertisements thinly separated by "program content." Now the double whammy has been finalized.

The government has sold the analog slice of the spectrum – formerly owned by we, the people – to the communications industry for $20 billion and we, the people have to pay for everything. On to the next adventure! **CP**

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U.S. air power and 70,000 foreign troops, has lost control of vast tracts of southern and eastern Afghanistan. Soon after the Taliban lost power in 2001, I drove from Kabul to the fortress city of Ghazni and then on to Qalat, Kandahar and Helmand. The road, a terrible 280-mile-long rutted track of deep potholes and broken pieces of ancient tarmac, was dangerous, but it was still possible to get through. Eight years later, the road itself is in much better shape, but the journey is now far too risky for a foreigner to undertake.

A few days before I met him, one of the security companies Abdul Bayan uses was attacked by Taliban in Qalat, an impoverished dusty town in Zabul Province; seven of their men were killed and three captured. Daoud Sultanzoy, an anti-government member of the Afghan Parliament from Ghazni, said he no longer dared go back to the city he represented, though he was "as much afraid of the government having me shot as I am of the Taliban."

Herat is the largest city in western Afghanistan, an area that has been mostly free from violence since the overthrow of the Taliban. Even so, I could only get there by air from Kabul's tumbledown airport, because none of the roads are safe. The day after I arrived, I had a picnic lunch with a building contractor called Obaidullah Sidiqi in an orchard he owned near Herat airport. He said it was safe enough in Herat itself but not outside the city. As a Tajik, like the great majority of the people in Herat, Sidiqi could not safely enter Pashtun areas. "Last year," he said, "I had two construction contracts, one for a school and the other for a road, in districts where the Taliban are strong. I could only go there by growing my beard longer, so I looked like one of them, and pretending to be one of my own drivers. Even so, the main engineer on the road building project, who is a Pashtun, told me it was too dangerous for me to come back."

The extent of the Taliban uprising since 2006, just like support for the original Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in the 1990s, is limited by the movement's reliance on the Pashtun ethnic group. "I wish," Daoud Sokarzoy – himself a Pashtun – said, "we could get away from the idea that the all Pashtun are Taliban and all the Taliban are Pashtun." It may not be so easy to dispel the second idea. The solidarity of the Pashtun and the Taliban's safe havens in Pashtun areas of Pakistan explain the movement's resilience in the face of what appeared to be total defeat in 2001.

The Pashtun are the largest community in Afghanistan, but at 42 per cent of the population they are still a minority. The Taliban have no support among the Tajiks (27 per cent of Afghans), Hazara (9 per cent), Uzbeks (9 per cent), Aimak (4 per cent), Turkoman (3 per cent) or Baluch (2 per cent). Hostility between these ethnic groups was always there, but it was exacerbated by massacres during the civil wars of the 1990s and the Taliban's refusal, during their years in power, to dilute their fanatical Sunni fundamentalism or share power with the non-Pashtun minorities. They didn't compromise, because they didn't have to, until 9/11, and the American intervention transformed the balance of power in Afghanistan.

"It is not that the Taliban is very strong," one Afghan politician said, "but that the government is very weak." It is also highly corrupt, fourth in the world in this grim ranking.

The anti-Taliban coalition, the Northern Alliance, the core of which was Tajik with some Uzbek and Hazara support, had been confined to the mountainous northeast of the country and was on the verge of defeat. In 2001, it was not only rescued but put on the road to victory by Washington's decision to overthrow the Taliban government in retaliation for its backing for al-Qaida. A few months later, aided by American bombs and money and strengthened by Pakistan temporarily withdrawing support from the Taliban, Northern Alliance forces swept into Kabul; there was little resistance. Its leaders, to their own astonishment, were the new rulers of Afghanistan. They have never entirely lost their grip on power in the years since. Their palatial houses, often built on land expropriated from the government, dominate expensive districts like Sherpoor. "I see them driving through Kabul," one Pashtun businessman said bitterly, "in their SUVs with smoked-glass windows and well-armed bodyguards, without knowing or caring how most Afghans exist."

I spent the months before the 2001 war living in a poor and dirty town called Jabal Saraj, 50 miles north of Kabul. It was held by the Northern Alliance; the front line with the Taliban ran a few miles to the south through the heavily populated Shomali Plain, one of the most fertile parts of Afghanistan. It is full of well-watered orchards, their irrigation systems fed by the rivers flowing out of the Hindu Kush. Most people here are Tajiks, who had seen the front swing backward and forward across the plain. The Taliban had tried to capture Jabal Saraj several times, but they never managed to hold it for long. The main bridge in town was a bizarre structure, constructed on top of a pile of wrecked Taliban armored cars. When I was there eight years ago, Jabal Saraj was a miserable place, cut off by the Taliban on three sides; its defenders' only line of retreat being up the Panjshir Valley, one of the world's great natural fortresses and the most important bastion of the Northern Alliance. The Taliban were rightly worried about their enemies being able to mass their forces within striking distance of the capital. It was from the Panjshir and the Shomali Plain that the Northern Alliance successfully stormed Kabul at the end of 2001.

The Tajiks of this part of Afghanistan have been on the winning side ever since. Security here is better than in the rest of the country, and there are few checkpoints. Dozens of blown-up bridges have been rebuilt, and the road is busy with trucks and petrol tankers on their way to and from the north of the country – Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. Most of the fruit and vegetables on sale in the capital are from Shomali; its towns and villages have a prosperous air. But it is the old warlords, the anti-Taliban military commanders, who have done best of all.

According to their critics, they have been pillaging Afghanistan ever since the war ended. At the time I was living in Jabal Saraj, the overall military commander of the Northern Alliance was

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General Mohammad Qasim Fahim. A month ago Fahim, now promoted to marshal, Afghanistan's highest military rank, was chosen by President Karzai to be his vice-presidential running mate in the election on August, 20. International observers were aghast. "To see Fahim back in the heart of government would be a terrible step backward for Afghanistan," Brad Adams of Human Rights Watch said. "He's one of the most notorious warlords in the country, with the blood of many Afghans on his hands." This is true, but he is one of many. Karzai's other vice-presidential candidate is the Hazara warlord Karim Khalili.

I used to visit Bashir Salangi, a tough warlord who commanded the Northern Alliance forces in the Salang Valley, a deep rocky gorge north of Jabal Saraj that ended in a long tunnel, which pierces the Hindu Kush mountains and is one of the few roads linking southern and northern Afghanistan. Salangi was notorious for having pretended in 1997 to defect to the Taliban. He allowed several thousand of their fighters to flood through the Salang tunnel, having persuaded them that they had outflanked the Northern Alliance forces; he then blew up the tunnel behind them, killing large numbers. Soon after the Northern Alliance's victory, Salangi became Kabul's police chief and within a couple of years was being accused of bulldozing houses in Sherpoor in order for the new elite to build their "poppy palaces," so named because it was supposed that they were paid for from the profits of the drugs trade. Other warlords have also done well.

At Bagram airport, along with other journalists, I used to climb up the half-demolished control tower to be shown the Taliban front line by Baba Jan, an ex-Communist general. Later, he became a senior policeman in Kabul and is currently said to be in business, having won valuable contracts supplying the giant U.S. base at Bagram. Men like him, the surprise victors of 2001, became the powerbrokers of post-Taliban Afghanistan. Karzai is criticized at home and abroad for relying on these warlords, but he seems to have little choice, and his recipe for staying in power seems to work. His own victory in August's presidential election looks inevitable. He has faced down Washington's hostility, which was particularly vocal at the beginning of the year, when American officials cited the corruption and ineffectiveness of his administration. The U.S.A. has since reluctantly come to see that it has no real alternative to Karzai.

Though often derided as the "mayor of Kabul," he has shown himself deft at maneuvering between Afghan warlords, government officials, community leaders and foreign patrons. Last month, he secured the withdrawal of the presidential candidacy of Gul Agha Sherzai, the governor of Jalalabad and another former warlord, who was his only rival for the Pashtun vote. Given that the new president must have strong support from the Pashtun, none of the remaining presidential candidates stand much of a chance. "It is not that the Taliban is very strong," one Afghan politician said, "but that the government is very weak." It is also highly

The Afghan government has very little money, and donations from foreign governments make up 90 per cent of public expenditure.

corrupt. In Transparency International's index of corruption, Afghanistan ranks fourth out of 180. "The whole country is criminalized," says Ashraf Ghani, the former finance minister and one of the presidential candidates, not likely to be elected. General Aminullah Amarkhail, the former head of security at Kabul airport, who was fired for his excessive zeal and success in arresting heroin smugglers, sees what is happening as wholesale looting rather than simple corruption. "You have to pay $10,000 in bribes to get a job as a district police chief," he says, "and up to $150,000 to get a job as chief of police anywhere on the border – because there you can make a lot of money." Two hours after arresting a notorious smuggler with eight bags of heroin on her, he received a phone call from the Interior Ministry, ordering him to release her and give her the drugs back. He says, she and her gang had a contract to smuggle 1,000 kilos of heroin out of Afghanistan.

At the other end of the country, the building contractor Obaidullah Sidiqi says that the award of government contract depends on bribery and nothing else: "You have shopkeepers winning construction contracts who have never built anything in their lives." More serious is the impact of corruption on the price of basic foodstuffs, which are more expensive in Afghanistan, despite its grim poverty, than in most of the rest of the world. "Wheat prices in April were 63 per cent higher than international prices," a recent World Food Program (WFP) report stated, so "food is still unaffordable to millions of Afghans." The WFP plans to feed eight million of the most vulnerable people across the country in 2009. Daoud Sultanzoy found that "because of corruption, a 70-kilo bag of flour costs 1,100 Afghanis in Pakistan and 2,700 in Afghanistan." Crooked customs officials and the need to pay protection money on the roads drive the price up.

In the list of the most corrupt countries in the world, Afghanistan comes just before Iraq. But in one respect, the impact of corruption in the two countries is very different. Iraq is an oil state with an annual budget of almost $60 billion. The Afghan government has very little money, and donations from foreign governments make up 90 per cent of public expenditure. The policemen I saw in Kabul and Herat lackadaisically searching vehicles make about $120 a month. The only way they can feed their families is to take bribes. A private soldier in the Iraqi army earns about $600, and an officer who has graduated from university far more. The political landscape of Afghanistan is shaped by the country's terrible poverty. This was true before the fall of the Taliban, and it has been true ever since. Some 42 per cent of Afghanistan's population of 25 million earn less than $1 a day, and average life expectancy is just 45. The female literacy rate is 18 per cent, only 23 per cent of the population have access to clean water, and 40-70 per cent of the workforce are unemployed. The wide variation in estimates of how many Afghans are without a job shows the government's own uncertainty about the means by which millions of Afghans are trying to survive. The failure of the Karzai government and its Western backers to make a dent in these grim figures explains why so many Afghans are disillusioned with both.

Afghanistan differs politically from Iraq in that in Afghanistan, the presence of U.S. and other troops was at first popular. In Iraq, the insurrection against the United States' occupation within

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the previously dominant Sunni community began within weeks of the fall of Baghdad. By contrast, most Afghans initially welcomed foreign forces on the grounds that they were at least better than the Taliban and the warlords.

But the latest opinion polls show Afghan confidence in the U.S. and the Afghan government plummeting. The number of Afghans who think that the U.S.A. is performing well in Afghanistan has more than halved from 68 per cent in 2005 to 32 per cent now. Support for the Taliban remains low, but 36 per cent now blame the continuing violence on the U.S., NATO, or the Afghan government; 27 per cent blame the Taliban. People are dubious about the U.S. troop reinforcements, the so-called Afghan "surge," doing them much good. The first of the extra forces promised by Obama are beginning to arrive in southern Afghanistan.

By the end of the year, some 30,000 American soldiers will be added to the 32,000 already there. Their goals will be to train and expand the Afghan security forces, possibly raising their number to 400,000, to support the central government and to provide protection for the civilian population. They should at least be able to open up the main roads, linking the main cities of southern Afghanistan. There is also to be a surge in civilian advisers, including lawyers and economists, to aid the Afghan government. Each of these, it has been estimated, will be paid between $250,000 and $500,000 and will live in an expensive house in Kabul, protected at even greater cost by a security company. Afghan-Americans, some of whom have lived in the U.S. for decades, are being hired to come back as translators at a cost of $230,000 each a year. Plenty of indigenous Afghans speak English, but they are not trusted.

Meanwhile, in Farah Province, in the west of the country, the Taliban are hiring unemployed young men, giving them a weapon and paying them $4 for each attack they make on local police checkpoints.

Will the surge work? The problem for the U.S. military is that whatever goodwill they have earned by building schools, roads and bridges can be quickly lost. A quarter of Afghans approve the use of armed force against U.S. or NATO forces, but this figure jumps to 44 per cent among those who have been shelled or bombed by them. On May 4, the U.S. planes dropped 2,000-pound bombs on three mud-brick villages in Bala Buluk district, killing up to 140 people. The Afghan government, local human rights organizations and the villagers all agreed that only civilians had been killed. Enraged survivors drove a truck filled with severed limbs, heads and torsos to the local governor's office. Local shopkeepers went on strike in Farah town, and there were demonstrations among students at Kabul University.

Throughout the whole affair, the U.S. military produced more and more unlikely stories about what had happened, claiming that 60-65 of the dead were Taliban fighters and 20-35 civilians, but refusing, on grounds of security, to say how they knew this. Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission, after extensive interviewing, said that 97 Afghans had been killed, of whom 65 were children and 21 women. It found that none was armed. Nor had they been used as human shields. At most, two Taliban were among the dead. The U.S. military is supposedly more sensitive about inflicting civilian casualties because of the Iraq war, but there is little sign of this in Afghanistan.

Three or four years ago, a U.S. surge against the Taliban would have stood a much better chance of lasting success. "These days, the government is seen as the enemy of the people," Daoud Sultanzoy says. "This strengthens the armed opposition because they are seen as the only alternative to it." The government's legitimacy in the eyes of Afghans has withered as it fails to provide security, services, employment or economic development. There is growing hostility to the presence of foreign forces, particularly in Pashtun areas where fighting continues. Recipes for counterinsurgency, devised in very different circumstances in Iraq, may not have much relevance in Afghanistan. It will be politically and militarily very difficult to seal off the Taliban from their safe havens in Pakistan. "The surge is a double-edged sword," Sultanzoy says. "If it instigates more violence, it will provoke more resistance." **CP**

Patrick Cockburn is the author of *The Occupation: War, resistance and daily life in Iraq* (Verso) and *Muqtada! Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia revival and the struggle for Iraq* (Scribner).

Jim Webb's Attack on the American Gulag

By Alexander Cockburn

On June 11, Senator Jim Webb of Virginia introduced his bill to set up a bipartisan National Criminal Justice Commission. "We find ourselves as a nation," Webb declared, "in the midst of a profound, deeply corrosive crisis," namely "the national disgrace of our present criminal justice system" and "the disintegration of this system, day by day and year by year." This "is dramatically affecting millions of lives, draining billions of dollars from our economy, destroying notions of neighborhood and family in hundreds of communities across the country, and – most importantly – it is not making our country a safer or a fairer place." True words.

The goal of Webb's legislation? To establish a national commission to examine and reshape America's entire criminal justice system, the first such effort in more than forty years. Its aims, as outlined by Webb, are to refocus incarceration policies on criminal activities that threaten public safety; to lower the incarceration rate; to decrease prison violence; to improve prison administration; to establish meaningful re-entry programs for former offenders; to reform drug laws; to improve treatment of the mentally ill; to improve responses to international and domestic activity by gangs and cartels.

Webb compared the implications of his bleak data to the financial meltdown that has already eaten a trillion dollars of public funds and the "War on Terror" that has eaten another trillion, plus tens of thousands of lives.

America has 5 per cent of the world's population but 25 per cent of the world's known prison population; 7.3 million incarcerated, on probation or on parole; 2.38 million are in prison – five times the world's average rate. Imprisoned drug offenders are up from 41,000 in 1980 to 500,000 by 2008, a significant percentage of them with no history of violence or high-level drug activity. ; there is extreme disproportion in the drug sentencing – blacks have roughly the same drug-use rate as whites but are 7 times more likely to go to prison where there's hopeless overcrowding with all hope abandoned and extremely high recidivism rates. Four times as many mentally ill people are in

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prisons than in mental health hospitals, roughly 350,000 compared to 80,000.

One very important omission from Webb's profile of crisis was the crisis in prison medical (non)care, now so dreadful in California as to be taken out of California hands and managed by a court-appointed federal judge. This is clearly a contentious issue since Jerry Brown plans to run for governor on a platform that denounces medical care for prisoners as a frivolous expense. Governor "Moonbeam" Brown has learned his lesson and become no nonsense Jerry who rejects prison medicine as "holistic" silliness. Considering the ever growing number of three-strike lifers vegetating in their own organic manure, who have Alzheimer and can't remember their names let alone their crimes, the cynicism of Brown – whose family has lived off the people in every possible "job" they could "run" for (after) for over fifty years – is unfathomable.

What hope of reform? For thirty years, the political economy of the American gulag has had irresistible allurements: the "tough on crime" seal of approval for political candidates from police chiefs, prison guard unions and the victims' lobby. What governor, given the fate of Dukakis of Massachusetts or Ryan of Illinois, dares to pardon or even parole? In my recollection, only Mike Huckabee, governor of Arkansas, released substantial numbers from prison.

Indeed, "reform of the justice system" is now on lips that would otherwise disdain those words because of economic crisis. As Bruce Jackson pointed out in a recent article here on prospective reform of New York's terrible Rockefeller drug laws: the prisons housing the swelling flood of convicts become the darling of upstate New York. What legislator would vote to kill all those rural jobs, however counterproductive. Before the fiscal meltdown, hardly any; since the fiscal meltdown, a solid majority. New York State cannot now afford the huge workfare program that developed in the upstate counties around Rockefeller's prison-packing program.

Aside from the spur of fiscal crisis in every state, the only apparent opening political wedge discernible in Webb's opening statements is the issue of organized Mexican gangs that supposedly exist in "hundreds" of American cities. "There are an estimated 1 million gang members in the United States, many of them foreign-based," Webb declared. "Every American neighborhood is vulnerable. Gangs commit 80 per cent of the crime in some locations. Mexican cartels, which are military-capable, have operations in 230+ U.S. cities. U.S. gangs are involved in cross-border criminal activity, working in partnership with these cartels." Yet, the organized gangs of prison guards and cement contractors who control all the state legislatures are far more powerful.

So powerful that when Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger threatened to close and sell San Quentin to raise money (supposedly worth $2 billion as real estate), the guards and contractors didn't bother objecting. Instead, "progressives" rushed forward to denounce selling Golden State "landmarks" and to insist that there were helpful programs inside the grey walls, only possible because the prison was surrounded by Bay Area good people.

Webb's stark recitation of the grim facts was all the more dramatic since it is devoid of editorial comment. It reminds one of Machiavelli's little theorem: the more difficult the diagnosis, the easier the cure; the easier the diagnosis, the harder the cure. When it is obvious to all, there is no cure. **CP**

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